Judging as an Assessment of Symbolic Touch

Jim Hanson
Whitman College

Matthew Johnson
Whitman College

Parliamentary Debate prides itself on developing in the participants an ability to argue for the non-specialized judge. We have claimed that the strength of our activity is that it requires and fosters strong public communication skills. At the same time, we have recognized that our debaters need to have judges whose efforts respect the commitment that many debaters and debate programs put into the activity. We want our judges to be qualified and intelligent judges. Debaters become frustrated by a lack of consistency in the approach to judging in Parliamentary debate. Parliamentary debate needs to articulate what sort of judging stance our critiques ought to take. This stance should give debaters an idea on how to debate in Parliamentary debate and should maintain our commitment to building public argument skills. This approach will need, thus, to be informed by both an understanding of public argument and the necessities of competitive academic debate.

As is too often common in our activity, many judges have chosen to define their approach as a rejection of "non-interventionist" approaches to judging, which are perceived as prevalent in the CEDA/NDT community. The non-interventionist approach is designed to minimize the judge's influence in the decision and to simply vote according to the arguments presented, regardless of the judges' opinion about those arguments. However, this rejection of non-interventionist judging needs 1) reasons to support its rejection and 2) an approach to judging that is adequate to the needs of the community and the debaters. We agree that "non-intervention" is the wrong approach to judging, but we do not think this is true only for Parliamentary debate. We deny that the approach to judging is the important difference between CEDA/NDT and NPDA, rather it is the use of quoted material and the difference in topic use. We wish to replace the void created by the proper rejection of non-intervention with an approach to judging we call the "symbolic touch." The symbolic touch recognizes that arguments do not exist in a void and that their appeal in the public

sphere is based not upon the fact that they have not been answered by the opposition, but rather on their connection to us as human beings. This essay will explain how we came to reject "non-intervention" as an approach to judging and how the symbolic touch works as an approach to judging.

The Rejection of Non-Interventionist Judging

The prompting for this essay occurred when I (Jim) was judging high school debate during the 1988-1989 (yes, I am getting old) retirement security topic. I listened to a negative team argue that the affirmative plan is bad because it would save lives, increase overpopulation, and ultimately cause a Malthusian nightmare of scarce resources. The affirmative responded that such a position would lead to genocide. The negative responded with glee that genocide would really reduce our population problem. I was slightly troubled by this argument, but I still voted for it because the affirmative did not have a good answer and because genocide did seem to reinforce the link that the plan would increase the risk of the Malthusian nightmare.

Later that year, I began to realize how ludicrous this non-intervention trap is. I watched a negative team argue that we should kill the elderly in order to prevent resource depletion. The affirmative responses were pathetic, yet I could not muster the "courage" to vote negative. I agonized over my decision for at least half an hour (don't you always?) and finally did vote negative. Afterward, the more I thought about the decision, the more I regretted it. What reasonable human being would ever vote for such a proposal? I vowed never to vote for such a repugnant argument that had so little real support.

Sure enough, my vow was put to the test shortly afterward. The very next year I judged a debate in which I was asked to vote in favor of a large nuclear war that would kill virtually everyone. What made the debate so agonizing was that both teams claimed they would be the best path to nuclear war! I wanted to stop the debate and say, "No! -I do not believe that nuclear war is good! Will someone in this debate argue what I feel and think?" Alas, I suffered until the end of the debate when I finally expressed my unhappiness. These experiences convinced me that I could no longer be a judge who absolutely will not intervene.

Our rejection of "non-interventionism" is corollary of our awareness of the "myth of objectivity." The myth of objectivity is the modernist conception that there is such a thing as non-subjectivity. We do not mean to say that judges should be totally arbitrary and subjective about which arguments they "believe" and those they do not. But judges should not try to ignore the connection between arguments and experience.

We are not alone in rejecting "objective" non-intervention views of judging. James Klumpp, one of the originators of the systems "policy making" approach, has rejected the systems approach and instead suggested a more humanistic approach.[1] Thomas Hollihan, Patricia Riley, and Klumpp have argued eloquently for an approach toward argument that infuses the consideration of values and activism into the argumentation process.[2] Glenn Kuper has argued that judges should evaluate arguments with Perelman's universal audience in mind; that is, would a rational and reasonable audience adhere to the arguments presented by the debaters.[3]

We too believe that a narrative and humanistic approach is more appropriate. But we worry that this approach does not provide judges with enough guidance on how to go about making decisions. Three objectives must be meet in developing a judging criterion. First, the approach must be fair to the debaters. Second, the approach needs, to develop public argument skills. Third, the approach must give clear direction for judges. This essay is intended to outline the ways in which the symbolic touch will achieve these objectives.

The Symbolic Touch

The symbolic touch is communication of ideas that connect with humans as thinking, valuing, and feeling beings. The metaphor of touch expresses the way arguments work to persuade. Arguments are persuasive because they, through the symbols common to use as a community, touch us as full people. We are not machines; we are people who understand the world on a multiplicity of levels. Alasdair Maclntyre and others have argued that the human being is "essentially a story-telling animal."[4] Sonja Foss reports that the narrative structure allows us to "make sense of actions and events in our lives."[5] Persuasive arguments are arguments that connect to us as story-telling animals. As such, we chronologically apprehend arguments introduced

to us and this necessarily entails our feelings, thoughts, and connections to our experiences as the story unfolds before us.

Debaters are challenged to utilize this symbolic touch in their arguments. Understanding debate arguments in this way leads us to some important observations. First, arguments are not just words that make logical connections. They are the construction and reconstruction of what we believe is a reasonable interpretation of the events surrounding ourselves. When arguments become devoid of what we believe to be true, they lose their persuasive force. This means that arguments need to be based in our interpretive or narrative structure.

Second, this does not mean that arguments must conform to the judges' worldview, but rather that arguments must have some grounding in a judges picture of the world. In fact, this understanding of persuasion would reject a process of judging that required conformity. Arguments make us grow; they move us to be better people with a more complete understanding of the world. Parliamentary debate is too often, in our opinion, a "rush for the center." The team that can take the more "mainstream" stance is more likely to win a debate. We seek a middle ground, where arguments are connected to experience but not controlled by experience. Debaters should push the envelope and judges should not punish debaters for creativity and challenging the accepted paradigm, as long as those debaters can exercise the symbolic touch by appealing to our experience as human beings to justify their approach. For example, the mainstream view is that democracy is always the best option. Debaters cannot challenge persuasively that opinion by arguing that some people shouldn't get to make fundamentally important decisions in front of us as judges. That argument does not resonate with our experience and our picture of the world. But if they were to argue that democracy is dangerous because it risks shifting the tyranny of government control to even worse majoritarian control, we would hear that challenge and evaluated that arguments against those of the other team.

Third, debaters and judges should be aware of their initial beliefs. Judges, like any audience, enter the round with a set of ideas about the world. The process of evaluation does not happen in a vacuum, it happens in context of the judges' experience. Judges should not fool themselves into thinking they are objective deciders, they should be aware of how arguments made by the debaters connect to their experience and articulate the reasons why those arguments are

superior. They should not say "I agree with X so I will vote that way" but rather, "I agree with X because . . . ". Judges still need to give good reasons for their decisions. We have argued elsewhere that rather than focusing on particular judging paradigms, judges should concentrate on giving good reasons for their decisions. We have articulated nine criteria for these decisions, and have claimed that these criteria are needed regardless of a judge's particular "paradigm".[6] We believe that these criteria can avoid the charge of arbitrariness and "interventionism." Judges should not give bad reasons for decisions. We expect debaters to give good reasons in debates, and judges should also provide good reasons for their decisions. Judges should not make arguments for the other team nor should they ignore arguments made by any debater without a good reason.

Fourth, this approach recognizes that public argument has different standards for proof then other fields. The great failure of modernity is to confuse what constitutes a proof in geometry and mathematics with a proof in other fields.[7] A good argument is not just logically consistent, but it need not be a logical "proof. A good argument needs to have the symbolic touch. Criteria for judgement need to be applied to the arguments presented and those criteria themselves need to be justified. Debaters who wish to argue that the other team is begging the question need to explain why circular arguments are bad arguments.

Conclusion

We argued above that an approach towards judging must be fair to the debaters. The emphasis on good reasons achieves this demand. Debaters, we claim, need to abandon, as do judges, the "myth of objectivity." Debaters should expect good reasons for decisions, but they should not expect judges to be blank slates. To do so denies the humanity of the judges and the humanity of the activity. Judging in parliamentary debate needs to build public argument skills. By recognizing that good arguments must connect to the audience, the symbolic touch approach encourages debaters to focus oh creating that connection. It requires debaters to provide the whole package of logos, ethos, and pathos and to become better thinkers and speakers. We also said that an approach to judging needs to give clear direction to judges. We certainly think that this approach gives more direction than impossible demands to "be objective." It asks judges to be explicit about the process of evaluation and to describe how they have

evaluated arguments in terms of their experience. It also asks judges to be open to adding to their experience and to listen to arguments that appeal to their humanity.

Judges are human beings and arguments that debaters present should reflect that fact. In saying this, we disagree with the notion that a bad argument holds true until it is countered. We believe that a bad argument is revealed as a bad argument by its very presentation. Bad arguments, arguments that utterly fail to connect to our experience, such as "nuclear war is good," do not need to be countered by the other team to reveal their inadequacy. For someone to advance such an argument, they need to must justify such a counter-intuitive claim with strong reasons. Those reasons will be strong only if they possess the symbolic touch, not just if they are consistent logically. Debate is not a cold, calculated exercise in formal logic. Debate is the clash of arguments that are vying for agreement with the experience of the critic. They are competing for the symbolic touch.

Works Cited

[1]James Klumpp, "Beyond the Social Engineering Paradigm: Public Policy Decision-Making - Fifteen Years Later," in *Argument and Critical Practice: Proceedings of the Fifth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation* ed. Joseph Wenzel (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1987).

[2]Thomas Hollihan, Patricia Riley, and James F. Klumpp, "Greed versus Hope, Self-interest versus Community: Reinventing Argumentative Praxis in Post-Free Marketplace America, in *Argument and the Postmodern Challenge: Proceedings of the Eighth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation* ed. Raymie McKerrow (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1993).

[3] Glenn Kuper, "The Use of Perelman's Universal Audience in Non-Policy Debate," in *Spheres of Argument: Proceedings of the Sixth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation* ed. Bruce Gronbeck (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1989).

[4]Alasdair Maclntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981; rpt. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1984). p. 216.

[5]Sonja Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, (1996; Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press), p. 399.

[6] Jim Hanson, "Justifying Decisions: Good Ballots Give Good Reasons," *Southern Journal of Forensics*, Summer 1997. The nine criteria are: decision issues, argument assessment, argument responsive, avoids arbitrariness, justification cogency, argument presentation, philosophy match, justification consistency, and improvement.

[7] Thanks to David Carey, Professor of Philosophy at Whitman College, for this insight.